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ABSTRACT

An elective graduate course on multicultural education in a teacher education program had two main goals: (1) to develop student awareness of the ways in which race, class, and gender affect educational achievement; and (2) to encourage students to challenge social inequality and promote an acceptance of cultural diversity. A social reconstructionist view of multicultural education was presented, in which the inequalities in educational achievement were connected to larger issues of equity and justice in society. In order for teachers to be able to help others clarify their identities, they must first understand their own personal and cultural values and identities. Students were asked to write a social identity paper, school experience paper, research paper, and course summary, which reflected on their reaction to the course and developed a plan of action to support the learning experiences of a diverse student body. Three challenges in teaching this course included: expressing and clarifying feelings, monitoring classroom interaction, and challenging white males. For many students, the most powerful learning experiences involved increased self knowledge. Potential change is felt to be limited by lack of a broad vision of change, failure to acknowledge privileged opportunities, and differences in stages of student development. (Contains 15 references.) (JDD)

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PREPARING TEACHERS FOR DIVERSITY: THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

ED 404 300

The disparity between teachers who are largely white and middle class and an increasingly diverse student body has served to highlight the importance of multicultural education (Dilworth, 1992; Garcia & Pugh, 1992). While there is a growing body of literature on multicultural education and teacher preparation, the process of instruction for multicultural education has received little attention (Sleeter, 1991). How can teacher educators engage students' beliefs and challenge their prejudices and oppressive behaviors?

During the Summer of 1992 I taught an elective graduate course on Multicultural Education. The course had two main goals: 1) to develop student awareness of the ways in which race, class and gender affect educational achievement and 2) to encourage students to challenge social inequality and promote an acceptance of cultural diversity. Of the 17 students in the class, three of them were white males, one was an African American female, and the rest were white females. Apart from three students who described themselves as being working class, the majority of the students were from the middle class. The students were divided fairly evenly between teachers and full time graduate students. A social reconstructionist view of multicultural education (Sleeter and Grant, 1987) was presented in which the inequalities in educational

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achievement are connected to larger issues of equity and justice in society (Nieto, 1992).

In order for teachers to be able to help others clarify their identities, they must first understand their own personal and cultural values and identities (Banks, 1988a; Santos, 1986). In seeking to explain the failure of a multicultural workshop to modify student beliefs, McDiarmid and Price (1993) write "unless they (prospective teachers) become aware of their own preconceptions and have the opportunity to examine them they are likely to reconfigure whatever they experience to fit with their existing understanding" (p. 55). Therefore, in this course, considerable attention was given to students being able to explore their own prejudices, beliefs and assumptions. To facilitate this process students were asked to write a social identity paper and a school experience paper. For the social identity paper, students described their own socialization, specifically the messages they received about their own race, class and gender identities as well as those of people different than themselves. For the school experience paper, students reflected on and analyzed their own school experience identifying the influences of race, class and gender on their educational achievement.

Two other papers were required including a research paper on any topic related to multicultural education and a course summary. For this final paper students were asked 1) to reflect on their experience in the course, including both their reaction to the course, and significant learnings and 2) to develop a plan of

action to support the learning experiences of a diverse student body.

Challenges

Tatum (1992) describes three sources of student resistance to talking and learning about race and racism: race is a taboo topic, many students have been socialized to believe that the United States is a just society, and finally, many white students deny any personal prejudice. Although Tatum writes specifically in relation to racism, the sources of resistance she identifies also apply, to varying degrees, to teaching about issues of sexism and classism. Her three sources of student resistance both overlap with and help clarify the three main challenges identified in teaching this course: expressing and clarifying feelings, monitoring classroom interaction and challenging white males.

Expressing and clarifying feelings. Racism, prejudice, and discrimination are topics in which student identities are invested, and discussion frequently generates strong feelings. The course sought to provide students with a safe place to examine their beliefs and to learn from each other. At the beginning of the course I stated that it was very important that all students be able to participate and express their views. I encouraged the students to think about their participation, for example, in deciding who reports back from the small groups to the whole class. Student responses indicate that the course was fairly successful in providing a place for students to express and clarify their

feelings. Comments about the course included, "It was disturbing, because I have been forced to evaluate my own beliefs and feelings," "This was one of the most frustrating, difficult to grasp and overwhelming classes," "It was a most emotionally draining course. . . This multicultural experience has not been a pleasant one, but change is sometimes unpleasant."

Monitoring classroom interaction. Because the students are members of different social class, race and gender groups, interactions between them often recreated the same power dynamics of the larger society. For example, interactions between male and female students exhibited some of the traditional power relationships of male dominance and female subordination (Maher, 1991). Although there were only three male students in the class two of them were among the most outspoken students. I frequently had to remind students, particularly the male students, that multicultural education begins with ourselves, and includes an analysis of who talks, and who does not talk, of who listens and of whose views are considered important.

One particularly striking incident involved a talkative male student who interrupted a female student. When he was told that he had to allow her to finish speaking, he left the room. This incident disrupted the class and created considerable uneasiness. It also clearly called attention to a behavior that he took for granted.

Teaching white males. Tatum's (1992) observation that white students deny personal prejudice, is supported by Sleeter's (1991)

finding that "It is much more difficult to help students who are members of dominant groups learn to view the world critically" (p. 21). Part of the difficulty is that discussions of power, often present white males as being responsible for the inequalities in our society. Consequently, discussion of power can result in white males feeling attacked, and then becoming withdrawn or defensive. Such responses reduce the chances of white males openly examining their own attitudes and behaviors. A model of socialization where the emphasis is placed not on blaming, but on understanding how people are socialized into oppressive ways is important. In addition, I assumed that my presence as a white middle class male, would offer the male students some support. Despite these safeguards, two of the male students expressed concern in their final papers about the way in which blame was placed on white males.

Outcomes

For many students, the most powerful learning experiences involved increased self knowledge. Several stated that this was the first time they had examined their own social identity. One student wrote:

> The social identity paper was difficult for me because I had to come to terms with "who I am." This has weighed heavily on my mind because I had never really done any soul searching about my biases and prejudices until this course.

Another student described having done more thinking about herself and her beliefs, values and attitudes than ever before. Students'

reflections were often very revealing as they recognized the limitations of their experiences. As one student put it, "I began to realize I had lived in somewhat of a bubble, basically exposed to my own race and my own social class." Another student was surprised to realize that she had attended all white schools.

> In looking back over the past few weeks, I must say that I have had the opportunity for the first time in any class, to explore my inner self in relation to race, class and gender. . . Not in all my years had I even considered that I always went to all white schools.

Two students who, at the start of the course, stated that they treated everyone equally, later described incidents in which they realized that they did discriminate against students. One stated "I have come to realize during this course that I do in fact have some very strong prejudices. I am not proud of this new-found knowledge because I sincerely thought that I treated everyone I came in contact with equally." The second student reported to the class that she had been using traditional sex role stereotypes with her students, including rewarding her female students with stickers of bears and bunnies and her male students with stickers of astronauts. She also cited several other examples such as telling a female student to "sit like a lady."

In addition to gaining greater self knowledge, students recognized the existence of a variety of perspectives and accepted a more diverse world view. One student who taught at an all white Christian Academy, stated that, prior to the course, she had never thought about teaching her white students about other races. She

now recognized the need for a multicultural program because, "such students are in great danger of forming stereotypes of others."

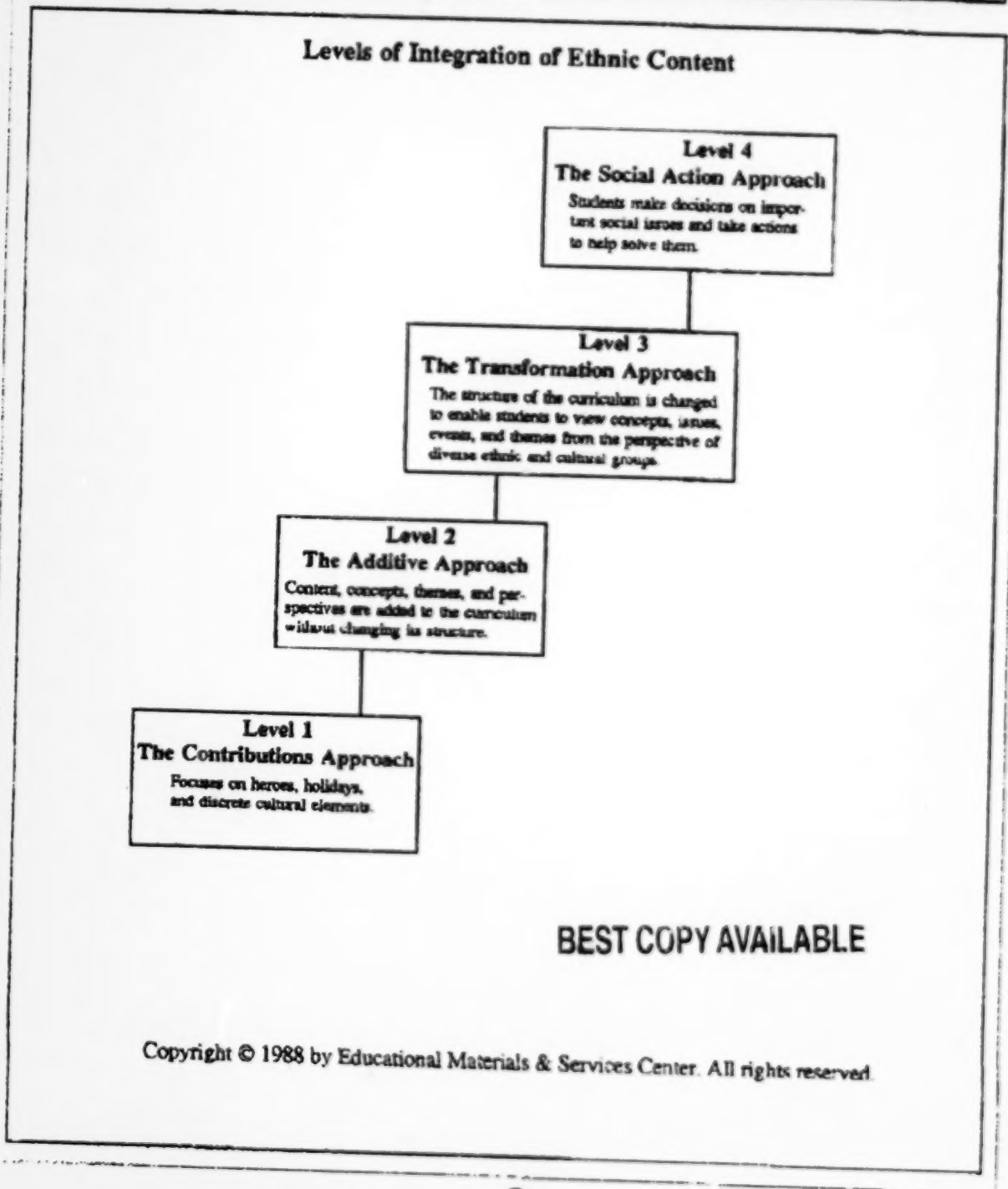
One of the main ways that students increased their understanding of different perspectives was by listening to their fellow students. While interaction was often harmonious, there were also many occasions in which conflicting views were expressed. Three students wrote about their frustration and disagreement with the racist and sexist views of some of their peers. One student stated "It has been very difficult for me to contain my frustration and listen with an open mind to some of the archaic views of my classmates." Another spoke of being "disheartened to find that so many (men and women) still have such stereotypical views about women and inclusive language." The third student, who described her usual manner of response as being to "immediately criticize those who expressed racist attitudes and behaviors," tried instead "to empathize with and understand where they (their racist attitudes and behaviors) came from and the reasons for their cultural orientations."

As part of their final assignment, students were asked to complete an Action Plan for how they would implement multicultural education in their work setting. While nearly all the students supported the need for multicultural education, most of their ideas for incorporating multicultural education were at level 1, The Contributions Approach or level 2, The Additive Level, of Banks' (1988b) four "Levels of integration of ethnic content."

Figure 1 about here

Figure 1

James A. Banks' Approaches to Multicultural Curriculum Reform



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Students' plans included teaching about other cultures, using literature and music to present different cultures, developing closer contacts with parents, inviting parents or guest speakers into the classroom to affirm differences and a variety of teaching strategies for affirming the identities of their students. In addition, two students stated that they planned to meet with their principals to discuss ways to implement multicultural education, including offering an inservice workshop to the school's faculty.

Limits to Change

Systemic approach. Although multicultural education was presented as requiring a systemic rethinking of schools and the relationship of schooling to society, few students included such a perspective in their plan of action. While this is probably not too surprising, given that teachers look for ideas that they can incorporate into their classroom, what was missing was any statement of a broader vision for change going beyond their own individual classroom or school. Overall students' understanding of multicultural education reflected a piecemeal approach requiring changes in the actions of individuals. This conclusion is supported by Sleeter (1992) that "most teachers did not link multicultural education with a collective social movement aimed at redistributing resources across groups" (p. 19). However, it is important to recognize that there are limits as to how much change can be accomplished by one course in seeking to change the attitudes, beliefs, perceptions of a lifetime (Santos, 1986). Ideally the

philosophical concepts and processes of multicultural education should be integrated into the total teacher education program (Hadaway, Florez, Larke, & Wiseman, 1993).

Acknowledging privileges. In analyzing their own educational experiences through the lenses of race, class and gender, several students identified incidents in which their gender or social class had limited their opportunities. While examples of discrimination were included, hardly any students described privileged opportunities related to being white, or male or middle/upper class. It would seem that Weiler's (1988, p. 76-77) statement, that "whites are not even conscious of their relationship to power and privilege," extends to members of other privileged groups. This lack of awareness of the privileges of being white and middle class is summed up in the following student's description of her situation. "Being white and middle class, I had never faced difficulty growing up. I never thought how it would feel to be in a different race or social class."

Differences in stages of development. The range in student responses to the course indicated the challenge of teaching students who enter such courses with widely different levels of awareness of oppression. While some students saw differences as a positive value, others saw differences as fragmentation with a threat to the "common bond." Students similarly varied in their abilities to cope with uncertainty. Two members of the class wrote that they sought more closure and consensus, describing the difficulties they experienced in leaving class with unresolved

feelings when "this was not something we could take home and discuss with our family." The model of levels or stages of development in students' awareness utilized by Bennett, Niggle and Stage (1990) and by Tatum (1992) in the development of racial identity, offers a useful framework for making sense of students' different responses. Such models may also provide reassurance in enabling students to locate their response, as well as that of their peers, within a broader theory. It may be as Bennett, Niggle and Stage (1990) suggest, that differential course experiences are needed in which experiences are matched to the individual level of readiness for multicultural education. Being able to tailor experiences to meet students' varying levels of awareness might increase the effectiveness of multicultural education courses.

Discussion

In describing the generally enthusiastic response of the students to the course, it should be noted that the course was an elective for graduate students. Moreover, in drawing conclusions about the effectiveness of a course based on students self-reports, it is important to recognize that students may have been influenced to report what they felt the professor wanted to hear. With this word of caution in mind, the course appeared to have had some success in furthering students' understanding of the impact of race, class and gender on educational achievement. Many of the students expressed greater self awareness, had developed a more pluralistic philosophy and recognized the value of multicultural

education. However, just as many of the students found it difficult to analyze their own personal experience through the lenses of race, class and gender, similarly few conceived of multicultural education as requiring a significant change in teaching or a restructuring of inequalities in society.

Conclusion

In this paper I have described some of the challenges to teaching a course on multicultural education from a social reconstructionist perspective. While students of privileged backgrounds appear willing to embrace a view of multicultural education as involving the teaching of tolerance and appreciation of differences, students are much less willing to accept that multicultural education involves a reallocation of resources and opportunities in society.

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